



Review

Understanding and using feedback – A review of empirical studies concerning feedback from external evaluations to teachers [☆]

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ABSTRACT

To improve the quality of teaching, educational accountability needs to include periodic external evaluations of students' performance. This requires evaluation formats which support the development of the educational process and provide information which is understandable for teachers. The aims of this study were to review: (i) how teachers understand the feedback they receive from external evaluations; (ii) how they use the feedback; and (iii) how teachers' understanding and use of such feedback affects the achievement of their students. None of the papers included contained simultaneous a study with all three of these aspects of external evaluations; the review shows that teachers have many problems understanding feedback and mainly focus their use of it on developing strategic teaching tactics. Research that focuses on teachers' understanding of external evaluation, their use of it, and how the use of the feedback can foster student achievement is needed.

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Contents

1. Introduction	175
2. Summative and formative evaluations	175
3. Feedback mechanisms	176
4. Key criteria of successful FEE	177
4.1. Understandability of FEE	177
4.2. Use of FEE	177
4.3. Student achievement	177
5. Features of FEE	178
5.1. Stakes in assessment	178
5.2. Frames of reference	178
5.3. Time interval	178
6. Method	178
6.1. Literature research and selection of studies	178
6.2. Summary of studies and analysis	179
7. Results	179
7.1. Understandability of FEE	179
7.2. Use of FEE	180
7.3. The effects of FEE on student achievement	182

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8.	Discussion and conclusion.....	182
8.1.	Fulfilment of the key criteria of successful FEE.....	183
8.2.	Effects of features of FEE.....	183
8.2.1.	Stakes.....	183
8.2.2.	Time interval.....	183
8.2.3.	Frame of reference.....	183
8.3.	Other factors affecting the effects of FEE.....	184
8.3.1.	Student achievement level.....	184
8.3.2.	Subject taught.....	184
8.4.	Limitations and suggestions for future research.....	184
	Appendix A.....	185
	References.....	188

1. Introduction

Educators in the USA, Canada, the UK and the Netherlands have long relied on external evaluations to provide feedback to teachers (Blank, 1993; Campbell & Levin, 2009; Hammond & Yeshanew, 2007; Torrance, 1993). In reaction to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) call for an increased accountability of schools, external evaluations spread to many parts of the world (OECD, 1989, 1993). Pursuant to such accountability measures and research on assessment and evaluation, there is a wealth of evaluation instruments and literature on the importance of external evaluation and the assumed positive influence on teaching and learning to be gained from feeding back the results to teachers (Bailey, 1996; Campbell & Levin, 2009; Cizek, 2000; Coe, 1998; Earl & Fullan, 2003; Heritage & Yeagley, 2005; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996; Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007; Visscher & Coe, 2003). *Assessment* refers to the observation and collection of information; *evaluation* is understood as the process of ascribing merit or worth to the results of an observation or data collection (Cizek, 2000). These assessments and evaluations can have different stakes; often low-stakes and high-stakes testing are distinguished. Test-based accountability, which is usually high-stakes, comprises the assessment and feedback of students' performance to the tax payer, government, parents, and students. The publication of these school performance indicators provides information to parents and students which can be used as a basis for informed school choice. Additionally, this information may trigger competition between schools and it can enhance school improvement if it is fed back to the schools and teachers (Visscher, 2001). However, few empirical studies have measured how well teachers understand the feedback they are provided with, whether they are able to use it effectively and whether such feedback provided to teachers at the school level actually benefits student achievement (Tresch, 2007). Conditions supporting the improvement of performance have not been identified yet (Coe, 1998).

For our project, we systematically review empirical studies that analysed how teachers understand and use *feedback from external evaluations* (FEE). We define FEE as information from external evaluations to schools that provides information about their students' performance as a possible basis for school improvement. The aims of this study were to review: (i) how teachers understand the feedback they receive from external evaluations; (ii) how they use the feedback; and (iii) how teachers' understanding and use of such feedback affects the achievement of their students. Our goal was to identify features of FEE that foster teachers' understanding of it and help them use FEE effectively to improve student achievement. We focused on FEE because it is neither developed, nor implemented nor analysed by the teachers themselves. The results of external evaluations are reported to the schools; they encompass standardised comparisons of student achievement outcomes relating to a vast number of classes or students, often with respect to national standards.

2. Summative and formative evaluations

To improve the quality of teaching and facilitate learning, educational accountability includes periodic evaluations of students' performance (Brägger, Bucher, & Landwehr, 2005; Scheerens, Glas, & Thomas, 2003; Tresch, 2007; Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007; Visscher & Coe, 2003). Generally, evaluations can be classified as summative or as formative, and external evaluations typically are summative (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation & Development, 2005; Scriven, 1967; Tresch, 2007). A *summative evaluation* (SE) is used to summarise a student's achievement status (Sadler, 1989) and to measure what a student has learned at the end of a unit. A judgement is made according to criteria and standards, but usually it does not have an immediate impact on student learning (Sadler, 1989). The FEE indicates any possible gap between actual performance and the requested standard (Ramaprasad, 1983); *formative evaluation* (FE) refers to practice in the classroom. Black and William (2009) define a process in the classroom as formative "to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited." (Black & William, 2009, p. 9). Although not designed for this purpose, optimally, external evaluations can be used formatively (Black & William, 2009; OECD, 2005). On this condition, FEE would result in teachers making appropriate adjustments to meet the needs of their students (Black & William, 2009). External evaluations are often referred to, but their use in

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